

# ASEAN Dance Festival 1994

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*ASEAN, Association of South East Asian Nations, formed in 1967, currently has six member countries: Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Initially, it was formed mainly for political and economical reasons: to contain the spread of communism from North Viet Nam which was launching an anti-American war with considerable success. With the end of the Cold War, and the changing political landscape of the region, ASEAN is now more concerned with economic cooperations than with ideological or security issues. In the last decade, greater effort was made to promote cultural exchanges, with numerous projects devised and implemented by the Committee on Culture and Information (COCI), with resources coming from ASEAN Cultural Fund.*

This committee, the COCI, launched an ASEAN Festival of Performing Arts in 1981 to promote cultural understanding in the region. Although the title sounds very broad, the festival has been focusing entirely on dance. As in all ASEAN event practises, the festival was rotated among all ASEAN countries. When the Festival finished its cycle in Brunei Darussalam in 1986, it was decided to split the festival into two: the ASEAN Theatre Festival and the ASEAN Dance Festival, alternating with each other. ASEAN Dance Festival was launched in 1990 in Indonesia to promote dance among the six Southeast Asian countries which are bounded by geography and history. The bi-annual event took place in Manila in 1994, at the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, from the 21st to the 26th of March. The theme for that year was "ASEAN Legends: Interpretations of Traditions."

Festival Director, Nestor O. Jardin, was enthusiastically applauded by the audience for his imaginative staging of the opening ceremony. All delegates, including the officers had to dance to the tune of ASEAN Harmony. In a big circle linked by bright colour banners, they symbolically showed the solidarity of the ASEAN community. The opening night also featured works of all ASEAN member countries (Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and

Thailand), and the guest performers, Bayanihan Dance Company, one of the most established folk dance companies in the Philippines.

Subsequently, each night was shared by presentations of two member countries. Brunei Darussalam performed a piece created by Awang Seruddin Bin Awang Damit, based on the story of a famous warrior and navigator, Sultan Bolkiah. He creatively integrated seven forms of traditional dance, thus giving the audience a chance to sample the dance steps and styles which originate from the country as well as those similar to the neighbouring countries. For example, the third dance of his presentation, the *Aduk-aduk*, is the ceremonial dance of the Kedayan, one of Brunei Darussalam's minority groups. On the other hand, *Alai Sekap*, resembles the bamboo dance of the Philippines, while the *Tarian Jong Sarat*, looks similar to the Malay dance performed in Singapore and Malaysia.

Indonesia featured the new work of one of the country's most promising choreographic talents: Sukarji Sriman. With original music composed by doyen in music and dance I Wayan Diya, and played by a team of top musicians, the hour-long programme, which is based on the legend of the *Lorajongrang*, charmed the audience with dramatic expressions and excellent dancing. It was episodic but not traditional narrative in its approach, showing the conflict between King Baka and Bandung Bondowoso, the suitor of Princess Larajongrang, as well as the

emotional complications of the young couple, in dance terms with great skill. In the opening scene, village life at the Larajongrang temple was portrayed by a series of group dances which were harmonic in mood and smooth in the flow of movement patterns.

The second section, was the depiction of the legend itself. Unlike the narrative dance drama, the choreographer chose to highlight only the major moments of the epic and the relationships, competing for love and supremacy. The movements although not identical to the traditional Javanese dance, do resemble its emphasis of contrast in 'refined' and 'militant' style of dancing, and of highlighting significant expressions in frozen postures. At the dramatic moment of anxiety of Prince Bandung Bondowoso, who has to build one thousand temples in the short time demanded by the princess, the choreographer and composer borrowed Balinese *Wayang* vocal expressions and movement patterns effectively. The dance drama ended in the light-hearted section of how the temple is now flooded with tourists who are attracted by the exterior and not the spiritual aspect of the ancient edifice.

In an obvious attempt to encourage a selected young choreographer, Malaysia was represented by the work of Mahmud Hj. Ibrahim, danced by the government National

Culture Complex, the Komplek Budaya Negara. Based on the legend of *Putri Gunung Senyum* (Gunung Senyum Princess), the choreographer attempted to blend elements of drama and dance as well as rituals in the dance drama. He used both traditional music derived from *Makyong*, which uses *rebab*, *gendang* and *tawak* as main instruments, and synthesiser and electronic music. Vocal expression was used at times abruptly suggesting that the dancers might have been in trance. The audience remembered less the main characters of the legend and more the movements of the rituals, which might well have been the intention of the choreographer.

The Philippines was represented by a dance drama choreographed by the Artistic Director of Ballet Philippines, Agnes Locsin. Performed by the Dayyaw Theatre and Dance Company, composed of students from Illoilo National High School, *Hililawod*, the hour long programme won acclaim when it was premiered at the First National Theatre Festival in 1992. Based on the oldest and longest epic of Panay Island in the Philippines, the strength of the dance drama came from the choreographer's knowledge

of how best to guide the students who are technically not perfect and show off what they have most; energy and creativity. Working with the original cast over a period of time, Locsin managed to inspire the young cast to master the intricate steps that are based on the folk dance of the region and dramatic intensity created by masterly control of tempo and emotional changes in the epic. The



THE WATER SLEEVE DANCE FROM SINGAPORE WAS TAUGHT BY A MEMBER OF THE FRONTIER DANCELAND LED BY ARTISITIC DIRECTOR MISS LOW MEI YOKE

dance drama was enhanced by the chanting and ensemble played by the performers. The impressive presentation reminds the audience how and what art education can achieve if they are managed skillfully. Even if those kids who performed so expertly in the in this production decided not to persue a career onstage, one has no doubt that they would value the experience of collaboration.

For those who followed the ASEAN Dance Festival, Singapore's presentation of the Frontier Danceland was a refreshing change from the multiethnic dance programme. Frontier Danceland was chosen to present four pieces choreographed by its Artistic Director Low Mei Yoke: *Tales of Grandmother*, *Three-inch Lotus Feet*, *Reminiscence* and *Crossover*. What came out most effectively was the two items that are clearly critical of some aspects of the practises of China in the past: the bound feet as criteria of beauty and the keeping of large numbers of concubines in the imperial court, *Three-inch Lotus Feet* and *Reminiscence*. The former used Beijing opera music as background showing two groups of females: the bound-foot ladies with round, painted fans and silk hankerchiefs in their hands roaming around leisurely and the women in *samfu* (plain cotton blouse and pants), crawling, moving on their knees, carrying each other like heavy

burdens, depressed and distressed, leaping in anxiety and anger but ending up in the same old situation. Life went on as usual. *Reminiscence* showed a court lady seeing her fate in the mirror. Low made use of two dancers to convey the grief of women trapped in the imperial court. The final item, *Crossover*, "a merging of

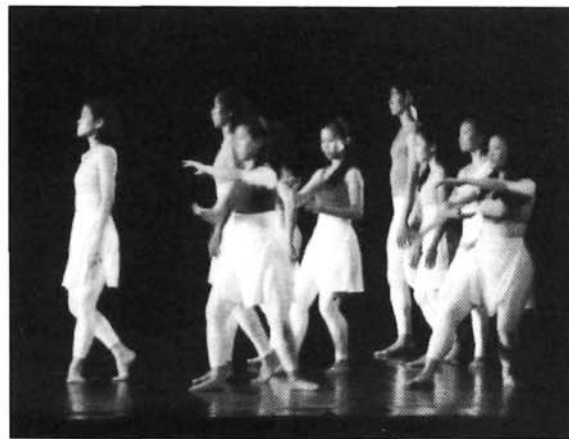
Indian, Malay and Chinese dance steps, to reflect the multiracial society of Singapore," saw the dancers simplifying the rich dance vocabularies of the ethnic dances of the island state.

For those expecting to see glittering costumes of classic mask dance drama, the *Khon*, Thailand's offer of *The Streams of Life* was a delightful surprise. The thirteen dancers and musicians, from various institutions and groups were gathered specially for the event, under the directorship of Dolchai Boonyaratavej. Using water as its theme, the music was arranged by Dr. Pratak Prateepaseem, linking popular folk songs such as *Loy Kratong* with old songs such as *Sieng Tiem*, and festive songs like *Ton Worachat* and sung by the Artistic Director Boonyaratavej and Marisa Sukosol Clapp with passion. Apart from traditional Thai instruments and the

bamboo flute, a computerized sequence was also used to transform a gentle Thai melody into a violent and threatening piece of music.

The choreographer, Suteesak Pakdeeteva, creatively varied the mood of the dance, showing the people paying homage to the river goddess, carrying out their daily activities such as bathing, washing

clothes, romancing with their loved ones, as well as their abuse of nature which angered the river goddess. The dance ended on a lighter note when the people were forgiven and once again danced happily near the river. The dance was helped by the costume designed by Anuwat Naksrisuk, who used traditional style of shoulder scarves for the dancers. The colours chosen for the dancers



CROSSOVER, "A MERGING OF INDIAN, MALAY AND CHINESE DANCE STEPS, TO REFLECT THEMULTICULTURAL SOCIETY OG SINGAPORE," CHOREOGRAPHED BY MISS LOW MEI YOKE

who represented the villagers, blue, brown and aquamarine, invoked memories of a Thai mural painting. While the dancers were doing the river scene, they changed into the ligh-weight fabric of dark and bright blue representing the streams, with the *tabengman*, (cross-shoulder scarves). Most effective was the large skirt used by the river goddess with cuts at the edges for the corp de ballet to emerge from, enhancing the image of the lotus.

The stage imagery will be long remembered by the audience. The high technical level attained by the Thai dancers was also a delightful surprise for the audience who are used to seeing only classical Thai dancing on the tourism promotion material.

A well-established format of the ASEAN Dance Festival is the inclusion of the lecture and workshop sessions after the performances of each delegation. These series of talks and demonstrations, are designed to provide the audience with a glimpse of the dance culture of the ASEAN member countries.

Brunei Darussalam's lecturer was Haji Ahmad Bin Haji Arshad. He discussed how the choreographer Awang Seruddin used traditional dance to portray the great navigator of his country Sultan Bolkiah. The audience was shown the

various ways of wrapping the expensive *sarong* (cloth used to wrap round the body), with golden threads.

Dr. Yulianti Parani gave the Indonesia lecture, helping Sriman explain his choreographic ideas. He also demonstrated both the female and male styles of classical Javanese dance. An excerpt of the dance: *The*

*Legend of the Lorajongrang*, was presented to help the audience to recall some of the patterns of movements seen in the lyrical piece.

The Malaysian lecturer, Professor Dr. Mohamed Ghouse Bin Nasuruddin, played the *rabab* briefly to accompany the KBN dancers performance of a short solo ballet choreographed by himself. Locsin gave a well-rehearsed account of her choreographic process with the students from the Iloilo National High School demonstrating the highlight of the epic they performed. She stressed that the production would have been impossible without the vision of the principal, Riza Amaguin, and the commitment of the group's artistic director, Ewadin Duero, and the devotion of the students. The audience was deeply impressed by her creative ways of developing the capabilities of the basically non-trained dancers and inspiring them to be committed and confident about their creative involvement in the process.

Singapore lecturer was Tan Choon Poh, a former lead dancer of the now defunct National Dance Company. He narrated the development of Chinese dance in Singapore, showing how Chinese dance in Singapore is moving away from the dominant influence of China and developing its own character. The dancers from the Frontier Danceland then demonstrated some extracts of dances in the company's repertoire. Most intriguing for the participants of the session was when they were invited to experiment with the long

sleeves dance, the 'water sleeves', a two-meter long sleeve used in Chinese classical dance.

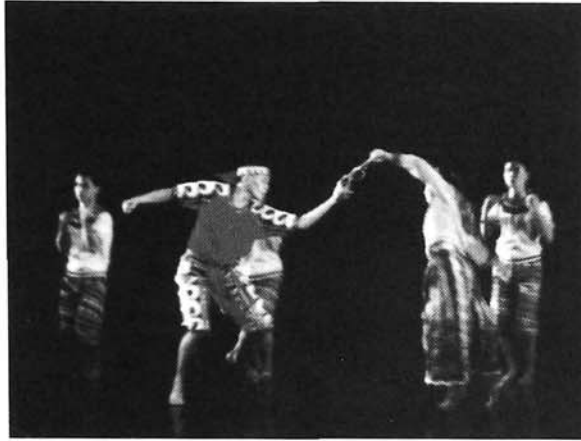
The last session conducted by Boonyaratavej began with well-selected slides showing the sources of his artistic concept in developing *Streams of Life*: Thai mural paintings and textiles. He then went on to describe how music, costume and choreography were integrated around the theme chosen by him. The choreographer, Pakdeeteva was invited to show how his movement patterns were inspired by the Thai classical dance and yet not a simplification or breakdown of the subtle traditional form. He indicated his approval of using the hand gestures of Thai dance and combines them with the leg movements of western ballet. He rather freed himself from the rigidity of both forms and invented movements that conveys the moods of his dance.

All these lecture and workshop sessions were free for the public but the crowd that attend these events were relatively small. Disseminating knowledge of dance is as important as staging the dance if one hopes to build up an audience that is ready to appreciate dance of Southeast Asia. What the festival organiser should seriously consider is how to ensure greater participation of lecture, performance and workshop. and secure greater support from the mass media by widely publicising the events before, during and after the festival. The organiser should also engage a professional video production company to document

the performances of the festival and market them, with schools in the region as its prime target. After all, the presentations at the ASEAN events are fairly representative of the best artistes in Southeast Asia. The documentary will be excellent teaching material to be used in schools and colleges. By interesting the young viewers, the region will be more hopeful in nurturing and recruiting a new generation of audience. The good news is that ASEAN COCI is now in the process of publishing a series of monographs on the performing arts in the region. Once completed, it will certainly help the public to gain insight in their dance tradition and current creative energy in ASEAN dance.

Nevertheless, the festival ended in the traditional cordial atmosphere of ASEAN events with the audience applauding enthusiastically. What remain are the memories of an ineffable aural and visual beauty. The next festival, scheduled for 1996, will be held in Singapore.





THE DANCE DRAMA *HILILAWOD* CHOREOGRAPHED BY AGNES LOCSIN, PERFORMED BY THE DAGYAW THEATRE AND DANCE COMPANY, ILLOILO NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

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